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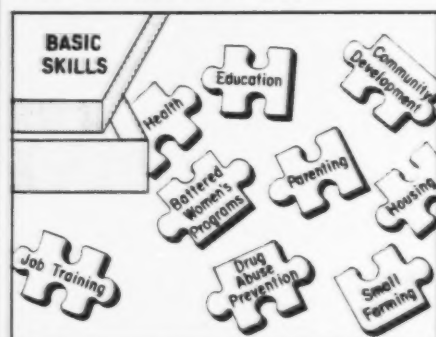
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ABSTRACT

The agents most successful in reaching and teaching those most in need of basic skills instruction are the community-based organizations (CBOs). They come into being in response to social and economic problems faced by their constituents--disadvantaged minorities, the poor, the unemployed, and the alienated. Because of their close ties to the communities they serve, CBOs recruit and retain persons who would not align themselves with a public school or program staffed by outside personnel. A common thread among CBOs is "empowerment." Two CBO examples are the Dungannon Development Commission, formed by residents of an isolated Appalachian mountain community, and the Highbridge Community Life Center in New York City's South Bronx, whose activities and services address the needs and aspirations of the residents. Key features of CBOs are that they are of the community, instructional settings are noninstitutional and nonthreatening, respect for learners is valued more than teachers' academic credentials, paid staff work as facilitators, curriculum is based on participants' perceived needs, the instructional style is highly participatory, and essential support services are provided. Most CBOs operate on shoestring budgets, while receiving the least funding from public and private sources. The Association for Community Based Education is the only national body organized to represent CBOs. (YLB)

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CBO's: Reaching The Hardest To Reach



That people who lack basic skills are most heavily concentrated among disadvantaged minorities, the poor, the unemployed, and the alienated is a widely known fact. Adults with minimal or no reading and writing skills accounted for up to 75 percent of the unemployed in 1982 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1984). They comprised over one-third of mothers receiving Aid to Families With Dependent Children (U.S. Department of Education, 1982); 85 percent of the juveniles who appear in court (*Adult & Continuing Education Today*, 1983); an estimated 60 percent of prison inmates (Correctional Education Association, 1984); and nearly 40 percent of minority youth (*Adult Performance Level Study*, 1977).

These groups, for whom illiteracy is just one more problem in a mosaic of joblessness, poor housing, malnutrition, delinquency, drug abuse, and social isolation, are the toughest to recruit into educational programs. Many, steeped in the culture of poverty, don't see how improving their reading abilities will make much difference in their lives. They are thus the least served by programs set up specifically to teach basic skills—the Adult Basic Education program, the voluntary literacy organizations, and the programs of other organizations which make up the bulk of the nation's literacy system.

The majority of adults enrolled in basic skills instruction today are marginally rather than functionally illiterate. They tend to be attuned to middle-class norms and believe that improving their basic skills will open the door to jobs, or better jobs, or a better life. Typically, because these persons have higher levels of competence in the basic skills to begin with, they are better motivated and easier to serve. And, within the limits of available resources, most literacy programs serve them well.

Literacy in Context

By all accounts, however, the agents most successful in reaching and teaching those most in need of help are the community-based organizations (CBO's). CBO's come into being in response to social and economic problems faced by their constituents. Usually they are formed by the communities of

people they serve—urban Blacks and Hispanics, reservation and urban Native Americans, welfare mothers, farm workers, and other underserved groups. Usually they link their educational activities with larger community development needs. In their basic skills work, they do not aim as their chief focus to improve the ability of their constituents to read, write, and cipher, but to bring about a larger change within individuals and the greater community through such activities as programs for battered women, health workshops, parenting classes, summer camps for disabled children, and home construction training. Their basic skills instruction occurs within these contexts.

Because CBO's have close ties to the communities they serve, they are able to recruit persons who would not align themselves with a public school or a program staffed by personnel from outside the community. Most importantly, retention rates of 65-70 percent are common, as compared to 25-50 percent in mainstream programs.

Despite the success of CBO's in reaching hard-to-reach persons, they are hard to count and define as a network of providers. This is partly because they operate in a wide range of settings—community centers, social service agencies, community colleges, churches, storefronts, housing projects. They also go by names that do not have "literacy" or "basic skills" in their titles—e.g. *Barnie Education Project*, *Boston Indian Council*, *Center for Rural Education*, *The Fortune Society*, *Solidaridad Humana*, and *New Horizons for Children*.

Whatever the variations among them, a common thread—and the term they use to describe it—is "empowerment". CBO's aim to help individuals gain a better sense of themselves and their own possibilities in the world. They aim to equip people with the skills they themselves think they need in order to give them more control over their own lives. Literacy needs differ from one individual to another and from one community setting to another. For an individual, the goal might be to get off welfare, or learn auto repair, or help a child in school. Or the aim might be to empower tenants' groups concerned with housing issues, or ethnic groups wishing to keep alive their cultural values, or ex-offenders wishing to become advocates on their own behalf. Within these individual and community contexts exist the ties that imbue basic skills with meaning—and establish them as a requirement.

The Women of Dungannon

Take the Dungannon Development Commission (DDC), for example, formed in 1979 by some 50 residents of an isolated Appalachian mountain community of Virginia to bring jobs, housing, education, and social services to the area. Per capita income for the 350 people of Dungannon and the 7,000 people in the surrounding area is \$4,541 with a median household income of \$8,654. Over 21 percent of Dungannon's population have incomes below the federal poverty level. What income there is, is chiefly from small family farming and work in distant Tennessee factories or coal mines. Unemployment averages around 15 percent.

(cont'd. on p. 4)

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CBO's (cont'd. from p. 1)

DDC was founded on the belief that there can be no personal, community, or economic development without education. Arrangements were made with the Mountain Empire Community College, 50 miles away at Big Stone Gap, to conduct classes in Dungannon's community center. The center, called the Depot, is housed in an abandoned railroad station which, with funds raised by the women of the town, was moved away from the tracks and refurbished.

At first, classes were mainly to prepare students for high-school-equivalency diplomas (GEDs). Later, college courses were added so that students who completed their GEDs could continue with college work. Students at the Depot now can earn a two-year degree in business management or education and certificates in geriatric nursing or community development. Four hundred students have taken part in over 240 Depot classes conducted side by side with senior citizen activities, family reunions, dances, fundraisers, political meetings, and potluck suppers. An additional 60 students have enrolled in Project READ, a literacy program started in August 1985 with the help of the Lutheran Church Women of Philadelphia.

Project READ's professional coordinator is Edna Compton, herself a product of DDC education. Ms. Compton, who is married and has two teenage children, quit school in the 8th grade. She married at 18, helped her husband on the farm, and worked in the sewing factory for 12 years before it burned down. "You can't make it in farming," she says. "I had to go back to school." She enrolled in Depot classes to get her high-school diploma and then continued in the college. She expects this June to get two two-year degrees. Along the way, she even made the honor roll. "I was real proud. They (her family) said I couldn't make it."

In this community where women have been the driving force, Ms. Compton notes with surprise that the literacy program is now attracting men. "They make up over half the students and range in age from 30 to 70. Their goals are better jobs; wanting to read newspapers and maps; learning to fill out forms, write checks, and read the Bible. Three of the men are coal miners who realize that the more mechanized mines require more reading and writing and also that many miners today need to find other types of work. One student is a foreman in the mines. He's 54 years old and has finished the 5th grade but could hardly read or write when he first came to class. He's made rapid progress and is almost ready for GED classes."

Aided by the problem-solving skills honed in the various classes, the total program has had a significant impact on the community:

- As a result of economics classes taught at the Depot, a sewing cooperative was formed that presently employs 34 people.

- After the town's sewing factory was destroyed by fire, resulting in the loss of 100 jobs held by women, most of them heads of households, and the loss to the town of the \$16,000 weekly payroll, the women of Dungannon, through their clames in community development, began raising money and planning a new factory to be owned and operated by the town residents. (It will be named Phoenix Industries, for the mythical bird who rose from its ashes.)

- There is no public library in Dungannon, but a start has been made on establishing one in a community-owned trailer.

Most of Dungannon's women depend on meager incomes and food stamps to feed their families. They also need financial aid to afford education. But in the fall of 1984 they discovered that because they received Pell grants—federal Basic Education Opportunity Grants—to help pay for tuition, books, gas, and related costs, the extra income disqualified them or reduced their eligibility for food stamps. They suddenly were faced with a choice between continuing their education or providing basic nutrition for their families. Ms. Compton's family lost \$66 per month in food stamps when she received a Pell grant. Another family where both husband and wife received grants had a drop in food stamps from \$227 a month to \$15.

But the students fought back, eventually testifying before Congress. In April 1985, Representative Rick Boucher of Virginia introduced a bill in the House to remedy the problem, and that is where the matter rests. Meantime, local and national church organizations have responded with an emergency fund totaling about \$12,000. The interim solution is to use these monies as a fund to reimburse storekeepers for DDC vouchers issued in lieu of the lost food stamps.

Teri Vaughn of the Dungannon Education Committee says that: "Today, we in Appalachia are not so naive as to believe that there is one answer to the inequities of income and unemployment in our communities. Yet, education is a major factor in finding the answers. What education offers us is the hope that we can help ourselves...make our own economic progress, our own leaders, our own future for ourselves and our children. We are so determined to follow this course that we are willing to face the question of feeding our children, or education, because we have a hope that if we continue, our children will not have to make such a decision."

New York City's Highbridge

Another CBO example, this one urban, is the Highbridge Community Life Center (HCLC) in New York City's South Bronx. Wedged between Archie's West Indian Restaurant and the Sunrise Beauty Parlor, the Center's appearance differs little from its immediate neighbors and the hodgepodge of stores that line the avenue: mostly bars, bodegas, discount centers, and abandoned buildings. But the resemblance stops at the front door. Inside, there is an array of activities and services that reach out through the devastated streets to address the needs and aspirations of the 25,000 residents of Highbridge—mostly Hispanic and Black, but including elderly European immigrants, mostly women, whose families have moved away. The Center is one of four HCLC sites scattered through the neighborhood for the provision of services, including literacy training.

When HCLC was first organized in 1977, adult education was not on its agenda. There were other urgent needs. The incidence of lead poisoning and malnutrition in children ranks among the highest in the city. There is no public health facility in the immediate area. Families worry about safe buildings to live in, jobs, welfare, crime, their children's schooling, and a host of survival issues. Before HCLC, the area was virtually without services. Sister Ann Lovett, the Dominican teacher and social worker who heads HCLC and was the organizing force behind its formation, found from door-to-door interviews that people went for help to their building superintendent or friendly bartender. Indeed, it was with the help of one bar-

tender that Sister Ann located the \$175-a-month storefront facility that was to become HCLC's second site (the first is located in the nearby chapel of St. Eugene's Church). At first, modest support from the Archdiocese, then the New York Community Trust and Morgan Guaranty Trust, provided enabling funds. Present operations are funded by a variety of public and private sources.

Today, HCLC programs speak to multiple community concerns including lead screening for children and other health problems; job training and family counseling; senior citizen outreach; advocacy and leadership training; a free clothing exchange; summer camps for children; and afterschool-homework assistance and remedial reading for youth. It was the youth program, in fact, that five years after the Center's inception, led to the adult basic skills program—developed in response to the expressed desire of adults themselves. When it was found that their greatest need was at the lower end of the basic skills spectrum, classes were organized around broad levels of ability, from zero literacy to GED preparation and English as a Second Language. The fledgling program, operated at first on a volunteer basis, has grown into a full-scale scheme with nearly 2,000 men and women presently enrolled in five-hour classes that meet twice a week, day and night. It is staffed by seven professional teachers and three volunteers. Operating funds, grown to about \$65,000 for each of the past two years, come from the New York State Department of Education and New York City's Municipal Assistance Corporation.

An essential ingredient of the Highbridge Center is that all elements of the community pull together. There is a communality of enterprise. Fifty percent of the board members and most of the staff live in Highbridge. Indeed, the staff is comprised mostly of program participants who learned their skills at the Center before moving into their jobs. When the dilapidated store and the rundown church chapel needed rehabilitation to make them usable, the nearby Wilson Publishing Corporation sent a crew to install bathrooms, windows, wiring, and partitions. When painting was needed, seven young men from a drug abuse program volunteered to do it. (Six stayed on to work for their GEDs.) The chairman of HCLC's board, who owns a local commercial laundry, lends trucks and drivers to collect furniture for families in need. The local firemen do the moving (and if there is a plumbing crisis at the Center, are on the ready). The drugstore, a neighborhood hub, is owned by a pharmacist who began work there as a stock boy at age 15. Now a board member and advisor to the Center's health activities, he also employs students from the Center's literacy program.

The closeness between service provider and receiver, and concern with the life needs of individuals, creates fertile ground for learning by the functionally non-literate adult. Highbridge students reportedly gain an average of 1.2 years in reading and 1.5 years in math after 100 hours of instruction.

In Sum: Key Features of CBO's

Highbridge and Dungannon are just two models of the great variety of CBO's in operation. Just how many there are nationally is not known because they are so highly localized. They rarely have links to national associations or other programs. The best estimate, from the Association for Community Based Education (which serves as a national voice for such groups), is that, conservatively, there are between 5,000 and 7,000. Their key characteristics can be summed up as follows:

- They are all of the community, know community needs, and can relate to community residents.
- Their instructional settings are non-institutional and non-threatening—located in housing-project lounges, private homes, mobile trailers, the open air. The Migrant and Seasonal Farm Workers Association, for example—now called the Telamon Corporation (after the Greek word for an architectural column of support)—conducts ESL and literacy classes in the migrant camps of Georgia and North Carolina. Open-air classes conducted at night, after a day's work in the fields, use buckets and stumps for seats and automobile headlights for light.
- Respect for learners is valued more than teachers' academic credentials.
- Some programs are staffed exclusively by volunteers, but in most paid staff work as "facilitators."
- The curriculum is based on what the participants themselves deem to be important to their own lives rather than on a standard course of study based on externally-imposed criteria and values.
- The instructional style is highly participatory, with little one-to-one tutoring. Learning is usually a peer-group process involving discussion of issues, debates, creation of stories, and self-generated materials.
- Essential support services are provided for learners—day care, transportation, help in obtaining food.



Telamon Migrant Workers Class

Shoestring Budgets

Most CBO's operate on budgets that range between \$15,000 and \$200,000 per year, usually at the lower end. The financial constraints they work under would be daunting to any conventional enterprise. Many don't survive and if they do, it is usually because of their tremendous commitment, volunteer labor, and hope.

The Barrio Education Project, a distinguished CBO known nationally for its creative and effective work in the impoverished Chicano community of San Antonio, Texas, simply folded up after 10 years. "We just got tired," says Carolina Rodriguez, its former executive director. The \$75,000 in annual operating funds rarely left enough to cover her salary. "Thank God my husband worked and was very supportive." The Dugannon program began with \$11,000 from church contributions in 1979 and has never had more than \$25,000 in operating funds in any year since.

Individually, CBO's may reach only small numbers of adult illiterates, but by ACBE estimates they are collectively providing basic skills instruction to 600-700,000 persons a year. Despite their known success in reaching persons at the lowest functional level, however, they receive the least funding from public and private funding sources. In most states, they are virtually cloned out of the \$200-300 million per year jointly provided for adult basic skills by federal and state/local matching funds under the Adult Educa-

tion Act. The federal intent, explicitly stated in the 1978 Amendments to the Act, was and is to broaden the delivery of services to reach the least educated and most needy. But decision-making as to which providers are to be funded is lodged in the states and administered through state education departments. Despite the language of the law, most states continue to do the familiar: to select providers they know such as the public schools and community colleges. In five states—Nebraska, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, and Illinois—CBO's are explicitly prohibited from getting state funds.

In Illinois, however, in an important new development, an entirely separate \$2 million state literacy fund was recently established under the aegis of the Secretary of State, bypassing state education monies and for the first time inviting any Illinois agency working in the field of adult literacy to compete for funds. As a result, several CBO programs are now getting needed funding.

Some argue that there are valid reasons for excluding CBO's from state funding. CBO's, they say, may go out of business next year whereas the board of education is certain to be there. Moreover, for every student served through boards of education, further state funds are generated. "But," says Chris Zachariadis, executive director of ACBE, "the job of state education directors is to find out who is doing the job best and who is serving the target groups of congressional intent. Appropriations which are clearly ineffective keep getting routine funding and CBO's have to struggle for crumbs."

There are a handful of states—New York, California, Indiana, Ohio, and now Illinois—that do aim to have a truly pluralistic delivery system. New York apparently funds more CBO's than any other state in the nation. It is one of the few places in the country where the state and a large city (New York City) have joined together to fund a variety of programs open to CBO's. Funds are channeled to the CBO's through the City's Community Development Agency, which also monitors and provides them with technical assistance. At present, CBO's and community colleges are getting about two-thirds of available ABE funds.

Private funding sources are no less problematic. CBO's are unfamiliar to many donors—and those who do know about them often do not clearly understand them. "It's easier for a donor to give money to a community college or a well-known voluntary program," says Zachariadis. "When CBO's talk about unemployment, and poverty, and housing, and literacy, donors get confused. They say, 'we want to deal with literacy, not housing.'"

But beyond lack of understanding there is often misunderstanding—and a natural tension between CBO's and their donors. On the one hand, CBO's, feeling misunderstood and bypassed, tend to shy away from mainstream funding sources on which they are in fact dependent. On the other, donors that help or want to help often are suspicious of CBO's because they operate in nontraditional ways or are hard to explain. "We've got to persuade them," says Zachariadis, "to trust the outcomes and be less concerned about the process for getting there."

ACBE Leadership

ACBE is the only national body organized to represent CBO's which, by their very nature, are confined to their own communities.

While in some way that quality helps to explain their strength, it also poses problems. Because of their rel-

ative isolation and small size, and because they exist in so many forms, CBO's are hard to pinpoint. Even a donor with a passion to help might be hard put to locate them. By the same token, it is hard to communicate to CBO's developments in the field that are vital to their own interests. At present much of the wisdom that has accrued from CBO literacy efforts is locked within the programs themselves. CBO's have had little opportunity to share their knowledge and experience even with like-minded practitioners. Their approaches are largely undocumented; their successes largely unknown outside their communities.

For these reasons ACBE is in a pivotal role. Now nearly 10 years old, it has 60 formal institutional members serving over 150,000 people in 33 states. Its mission is to serve as a network, an advocate, an information center, and a source of technical support. It performs these functions with a high degree of professionalism and energy in spite of limited resources. One of its most important services is a program of mini-grants which provides seed money to support member activities to improve their management and programs and Special Focus activities (such as economic development for rural women in the south-east). Grants average \$2,000-\$10,000.

Adult literacy has become an ACBE Special Focus activity. In 1983, with funds from B. Dalton Bookseller for a study of CBO literacy programs nationally, ACBE made its first foray into the field. While all CBO's provide education of one kind or another, not all yet provide basic skills programs. So ACBE set out to identify a representative sample of those that do, to probe their unique characteristics, and to identify their needs. A major finding, reinforced by the nation's leading adult literacy experts, is that CBO's are at the cutting edge in program development and in providing basic skills services to adults most in need of them. The question is how to gather and use accumulated CBO knowledge and experience to benefit the entire field: to inform other practitioners, guide policymakers and donors, promote needed legislative reform, and clearly and systematically advance a national agenda.

As the only organization representing such groups, and with its excellent track record, ACBE's role in this effort is crucial. If it can garner the funding support it needs, it is proposing to organize a national program that will develop links to CBO's across the country, provide them with information and other services, promote greater interaction and learning among them, and begin to systematically document their work. A central goal will also be to develop more meaningful data for policymakers, donors, and others in the literacy field.

In the meantime, ACBE is starting to make some small inroads. With a recent \$20,000 grant from the Irvine Foundation, it is working to identify CBO's in California that provide literacy services, and to gather them into a group. And with \$14,000 from B. Dalton Bookseller, it will be awarding 7-10 mini-grants to help strengthen CBO literacy programs in selected B. Dalton markets. In a third project, ACBE is preparing a bibliography of curricula, organizations, and individuals that can serve as community-based literacy resources in its mid-Atlantic region. Similar efforts will follow in other regions as funding is available, generating the first data base of its kind.

It should be noted that ACBE's mini-grant program has achieved handsome results with small investments over the years. It would be an excellent vehicle for donors wishing to make modest grants for CBO literacy work.